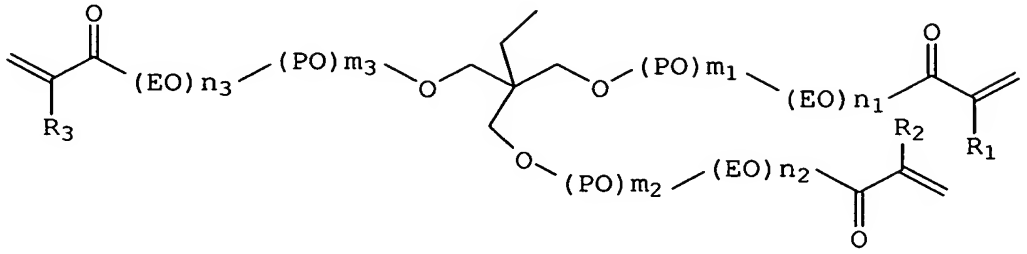
IN THE CLAIMS:

1. (Currently amended) An ester F of ~~the~~ formula I



I

~~where~~ wherein EO is O-CH2-CH2-,

PO is independently at each instance O-CH2-CH(CH3)- or O-CH(CH3)-CH2-,

n1, n2, and n3 are independently 4, 5, or 6,

n1 + n2 + n3 is 14, 15, or 16,

m1, m2, and m3 are independently 1, 2, or 3,

m1 + m2 + m3 is 4, 5, or 6, and

R1, R2, and R3 are independently H or CH3.

2. (Currently amended) ~~An~~ The ester F ~~as per~~ of claim 1~~,~~ wherein n1 + n2 + n3 is 15.

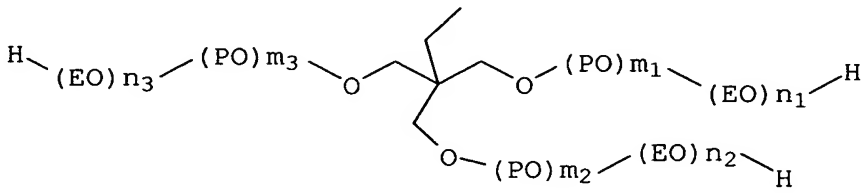
3. (Currently amended) ~~An~~ The ester F ~~as per either~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~and 2,~~ wherein n1 = n2 = n3 = 5.

4. (Currently amended) ~~An~~ The ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 3,~~ wherein m1 + m2 + m3 is 5.

5. (Currently amended) ~~An~~ The ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 4,~~ wherein m1 = m2 = 2 and m3 = 1.

6. (Currently amended) ~~An~~ The ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 5,~~ wherein R1, R2, and R3 are identical ~~and preferably H~~.

7. (Currently amended) A process for preparing an ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 6 of~~ from an alkoxylated trimethylolpropane of ~~the~~ formula II



II

~~where~~ wherein EO, PO, n1, n2, n3, m1, m2, and m3 are each as defined in ~~any of claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 6~~,

~~with~~ and (meth)acrylic acid, comprising the steps of

a) reacting the alkoxylated trimethylolpropane II with (meth)acrylic acid in the presence of at least one esterification catalyst C ~~and of~~, at least one polymerization inhibitor D, and optionally ~~also of~~ a water-azeotroping solvent E to form ~~an~~ the ester F,

b) optionally removing from the reaction mixture some or all of the water formed in a), during and/or after a),

f) optionally neutralizing the reaction mixture,

h) when a solvent E ~~was~~ is used, optionally removing ~~this~~ the solvent E by distillation, and/or

i) stripping the reaction mixture with a gas which is inert under the reaction conditions.

8. (Currently amended) ~~A~~ The process ~~as claimed in~~ of claim 7~~,~~ wherein

~~the~~ a molar excess of (meth)acrylic acid to alkoxylated trimethylolpropane is at least 3.15:1, and

the optionally neutralized (meth)acrylic acid present in the reaction mixture after the last process step substantially remains in the reaction mixture.

9. (Currently amended) ~~A~~ The process ~~as claimed in either~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 7 ~~and 8,~~ wherein the (meth)acrylic acid is not more than 75% by weight removed from the reaction mixture obtained after the last step, which reaction mixture contains the ester F.

10. (Currently amended) ~~A~~ The process ~~as claimed in any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 7 ~~to 9,~~ wherein the reaction mixture obtained after the last process step, which contains the ester F, has a DIN EN 3682 acid number of at least 25 mg of KOH/g.

11. (Currently amended) ~~A~~ The process ~~as claimed in any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 7 ~~to 10,~~ wherein the reaction mixture obtained after the last process step, which contains the ester F, has a (meth)acrylic acid content of at least 0.5% by weight.

12. (Currently amended) ~~A~~ The process ~~as claimed in any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 7 ~~to 11,~~ wherein the molar ratio of (meth)acrylic acid to alkoxylated trimethylolpropane in ~~reaction~~ step a) is at least 15:1.

13. (Currently amended) A process for preparing a crosslinked hydrogel~~,~~ comprising the steps of

k) polymerizing an ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 6,~~ with (meth)acrylic acid, ~~with~~ optionally with an additional monoethylenically unsaturated ~~compounds~~ compound N, and optionally ~~also~~ at least one further copolymerizable hydrophilic monomer M, in the presence of at least one free-radical initiator K and optionally ~~of~~ at least one grafting base L,

l) optionally postcrosslinking the reaction mixture obtained from k),

m) drying the reaction mixture obtained from k) or l), and

n) optionally grinding and/or sieving the reaction mixture obtained from k), l), or m).

14. (Currently amended) A process for preparing a crosslinked hydrogel~~,~~ comprising steps a) to i) ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 7 ~~to 12~~ and additionally

k) polymerizing the reaction mixture from one of ~~stages~~ steps a) to i) of claim 7, if performed, ~~with~~ optionally with an additional monoethylenically unsaturated ~~compounds~~ compound N and optionally ~~also~~ at least one further copolymerizable hydrophilic monomer M, in the presence of at least one free-radical initiator K and optionally ~~of~~ at least one grafting base L,

l) optionally postcrosslinking the reaction mixture obtained from k),

m) drying the reaction mixture obtained from k) or l), and

n) optionally grinding and/or sieving the reaction mixture obtained from k), l), or m).

15. (Currently amended) ~~Polymer obtainable~~ A polymer prepared according to ~~a~~ the process ~~as per either~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 13 ~~and 14~~.

16. (Currently amended) ~~Crosslinked~~ A crosslinked hydrogel containing at least one hydrophilic monomer M in ~~copolymerized~~ polymerized form crosslinked with an ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 6~~.

17. (Cancelled)

18. (Cancelled)

19. (Currently amended) A composition ~~of matter~~ comprising

from 0.1% to 40% by weight of at least one ester F ~~as per any~~ of ~~claims~~ claim 1 ~~to 5 and (meth)-acrylic acid~~,

0.5-99.9% by weight of at least one hydrophilic monomer M,

0-10% by weight of at least one esterification catalyst C,

0-5% by weight of at least one polymerization inhibitor D, and

0-10% by weight of a solvent E,

with the proviso that the sum total is always 100% by weight.

20. (Currently amended) ~~A~~ The composition of ~~matter as per~~ claim 19~~,~~ further comprising

a diluent G ~~ad 100% by weight~~.

21. (Currently amended) ~~Crosslinked~~ A crosslinked hydrogel ~~obtained~~ prepared from a composition of ~~matter as per~~ claim 19 ~~or 20 l)~~, and optionally ~~postcrosslinking the reaction mixture obtained~~ postcrosslinked

~~m) drying the reaction mixture obtained directly or from l), and~~

~~n) optionally grinding and/or sieving the reaction mixture obtained directly or from l) or m)~~.

22. (Cancelled)

23. (Currently amended) ~~Crosslinked~~ A crosslinked hydrogel having a saponification index of less than 10~~, preferably less than 8~~.

24. (Currently amended) ~~Crosslinked~~ A crosslinked hydrogel ~~as per any of claims 15, 16, 17 or 21~~ prepared according to claim 13 having a saponification index of less than 10~~, preferably less than 9~~.

25. (New) The ester F of claim 1 wherein R1, R2, and R3 are H.

26. (New) A polymer prepared according to the process of claim 14.

27. (New) An article comprising a polymer prepared according to the method of claim 13.

28. (New) The article of claim 27 selected from the group consisting of a hygiene article, a packaging material, and a nonwoven.

29. (New) The crosslinked hydrogel of claim 23 having a saponification index of less than 8.

30. (New) The crosslinked hydrogel of claim 24 having a saponification index of less than 9.